DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 150 639 CS 203 971

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TITLE A System for Teaching College Freshmen to Write a Research Paper.
PUB DATE Oct 77
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Northeast Regional Conference on English in the Two-Year College (20th, Buffalo, New York, October 21-22, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Freshmen; *Composition (Literary); Composition Skills (Literary); *English Instruction; *Expository Writing; Higher Education; Plagiarism; *Research Skills; *Teaching Techniques; *Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Research Papers

ABSTRACT

Students in college composition courses often have great difficulty learning to write research papers. They can learn to write better research papers through a series of steps: learning to read for the main point, writing opinion papers on topics that are personally meaningful to them, preparing lists of questions implicit in the opinion papers in order to provide a focus for their research, researching their topics, and transforming their opinion papers into research papers that draw on available source materials. Although the system has a few disadvantages, it minimizes or eliminates the problems involved in traditional approaches, helps students avoid common flaws in research papers, and reduces or eliminates plagiarism. (GW)

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A SYSTEM FOR TEACHING COLLEGE FRESHMEN TO WRITE A RESEARCH PAPER

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October 1977

The composition course that includes the research paper has always been the most difficult course for me to teach--and the most depressing. I have found students more hostile to English in this course than in any other, and their writing worse in this course than in any other. The traditional approach of simply explaining how to write a research paper and showing the students sample papers did not work for me. I therefore developed a new approach involving the writing of an opinion paper prior to the research paper, with encouraging results.

Problems with Past Approaches:

The same problems appeared with every class I taught using traditional methods. Students complained about the assigned topics. Regardless of how timely or "relevant" the topic, some students simply were not interested. And even the students who were interested in the topic had such weak reading skills that they could not use library materials in any meaningful way.

Then there were the papers themselves. No matter how much I stressed in class the difference between a report and a thesis paper, and the unacceptability of the former, I still received papers in which the student had not taken a stand on an issue, but rather had merely collected bits of information on the topic. The papers often contained little or no commentary on the source material; note cards were simply spliced together with brief transitional phrases. The papers contained practically none of the students' own thinking, in spite of my brilliant (I thought) image of a chocolate chip cookie with lots of dough and just six or eight chips. And, of course, the organization of the papers was often illogical.

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Under the traditional system, I found the course degenerating into a meaningless recitation of the mechanics of footnote and bibliography form. And I never taught the course without discovering at least one flagrant example of plagiarism.

Origins of a New Approach:

For a while I changed textbooks every quarter, mistakenly thinking that books were the source of the problem. Meanwhile, I discussed with colleagues my own and my students' failures. One series of discussions with Dr. Elizabeth Mastrangelo, founder of the Child Development Program at Lakeland Community College, resulted in my decision to teach, at the beginning of the course, those reading skills necessary to doing library research.

Two writers who influenced me significantly as I developed my new system were Hans Guth, who has a chapter on opinion papers in Words and Ideas, and Jacqueline Berke, whose Twenty Questions for the Writer convinced me that every composition assignment should be given in the form of a question.

Description of the New Approach:

Teaching reading techniques, the first component of the new system, is in no way a misuse of class time. The results have been gratifying. I found that my students were pleasantly astonished to discover that the main point of an article can usually be found in one sentence very near the beginning or very near the end, and that the title is often a clue to the main point. Learning to read for the main point and major supports is a step toward better note cards. Research papers are often flawed by the student's lack of another reading skill, the ability to distinguish between fact and speculation in his sources. I now assign one reading selection early in the term primarily for the purpose of pointing out such speculative language as "perhaps," may be," and "possible exlanation." I half expected my students to take offense at such "low-level"

instruction; on the contrary, they sat up, paid attention, and took notes with enthusiasm. They were likewise happy to learn that a chart often presents all the significant information in an article.

The second step in the system is to select truly universal topics. The three that I am using now are family, work, and education. (The student writes three pairs of papers in a ten-week quarter. The opinion papers are about five hundred words long, the research papers about seven hundred fifty to one thousand words.) These topics affect everyone; students come to class with at least rudimentary opinions already formed.

The third step is to assign the topic in question form and to pose the question in such a way that it applies to the student personally. The question will be something like "What should I do about X" or "What kind of X will be right for me?" For the topic "family," we read and discuss two articles on marriage and children. The question is, "What family style should I choose for myself? Why?" We discuss the alternatives: marriage, staying single, living-together arrangements, etc.; no children, just one or two children, many children. The student's thesis will be something like, "The best family style for me will be marriage with no children." The answer to the question, "Why?" gives the student his outline: I. (Reason #1), II. (Reason #2), etc.

Step four of this system is for the student to write his opinion paper, without doing any library research. He will try to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of the different "family styles," based on his own personal experiences (as a member of a family of some kind), observations (of relatives, friends, neighbors), and accumulated random reading. (In the opinion paper I permit students to say such things as, "I read in a magazine last year that...," but I tell them that for the research paper they must either locate the reference and document it, or delete it.)

The fifth step, a crucial one for the future research paper, is for the student to revise the opinion paper for better logic and organization. Since I grade the opinion papers before the students ever do any research, I can head off any potential disasters. I gain valuable control over my students' work and can often prevent an otherwise inevitable failure.

The sixth step is for the student to prepare a list of the questions implicit in his opinion paper. I instruct the class to challenge each assertion they have made. ("Does marriage provide emotional security?" "Is it cheaper to stay single?" "Will an only child be spoiled?" "Do children in large families feel unloved?") With this list of questions, the students are finally ready to go to the library. Their research now has focus. They do not just read aimlessly "on the topic."

Step seven, doing the library research, still involves bibliography cards and note cards, using the card catalog and the Readers' Guide, etc. But now the students are more likely to succeed--and to spend less time on their research paper than under the traditional system.

Step eight is transforming the opinion paper into a research paper. Here I teach introduction of source material [see James D. Lester, Writing Research Papers, 2nd ed. (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1976), p. 61.] as well as proper documentation. If the student has adequately revised his opinion paper, writing the research paper consists primarily of inserting his note card material in the appropriate places, with suitable introductory phrases and standard footnotes. If a student changes his opinion on the topic after doing research, he simply revises his thesis and those portions of the paper with which he no longer agrees. The basic structure of the paper remains intact. For example, a student may start out opting for the single life because he thinks it will offer him freedom and be less expensive than married life.

If his research convinces him that these benefits are not necessarily forthcoming, he can change his thesis to something like "I probably will get married because the single life is not freer or less expensive than marriage." Or he can stick to his original thesis, but qualify it: "Even though the single life is not freer or less expensive than marriage, I want to stay single." In this instance, I would insist that the student expand his outline, and his paper, to include at least one more section, which would be an argument for the single life that did not appear in the opinion paper. The thesis may change, but the student never has to scrap his opinion paper entirely and start over. Any problems that arise because of changed opinions can be handled through conferences with individual students.

Disadvantages of the New Appraoch:

The system is not perfect, but it is a significant improvement over traditional approaches. I have encountered only three problems since I started teaching the research paper this way.

First, some students are reluctant to disclose information about themselves. They want to write only on safe, neutral topics, so that they can remain strictly anonymous. These students want to write reports only. My answer to their objections is that, as college students, they must learn to take a stand and support it. I explain the importance of argumentative writing in their intellectual development. To allay their fears that I am seeking intimate confessions from them, I remind then that they are always in control of the writing process and that they always choose how much information to divulge. Student resistance to writing a "personal experience" paper usually subsides after the first opinion paper.

The second problem is that a few students in each class seem unable to grasp the notion of reasons leading to a conclusion. Each writing assignment forces the student to arrive at a conclusion on an issue (i.e., answer the

assigned question) and then give reasons to support his conclusion. But some of my students seem to know only one way to write a multi-paragraph essay, simple analysis (division into parts). So even though I insist that they write their thesis and outline in such a way that each Roman numeral heading can be attached to the thesis with the word "because," I still have gotten some papers that offer as a thesis something like, "Success in marriage requires patience, love, and a good income." I am baffled. I simply do not yet know what to do with students who cannot comprehend causal analysis.

The third problem is a tendency for the students to ignore research information that does not support the thesis of their opinion paper. Some students have been unwilling to change their thesis to fit the evidence they uncover. As a result, this quarter I am requiring that each research paper have a short section on the opposing argument(s). I have also stressed more heavily the necessity of fairness (freedom from bias) in research papers. I hope that this will solve the problem.

Advantages of the New Approach:

The three problems inherent in my system are not burdensome, considering that all the old problems have been minimized or eliminated. Using my new approach, I find less student apathy toward the topics of the research papers. Note cards contain more meaningful information, the result, I suspect, of better reading habits. Each paper makes a point, takes a stand. The papers are better organized and show good balance between commentary and source material. Rather than mechanics, the course emphasizes logical thought and integrating source material with commentary. Students spend their time in the library more productively and throw away fewer note cards. And I have not detected even one instance of plagiarism while using this approach. The system seems to make plagiarism irrelevant and practically impossible, especially if the opinion papers are written in class.

Summary:

A better freshman research paper can result from having the student first write an opinion paper based on personal experience. The opinion paper then guides the student's library research. This system permits the instructor to help the student avoid common flaws in research papers and reduces or eliminates plagiarism.